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Statement submitted by Women in Alternative Action, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Women in Alternative Action is a Cameroonian non-governmental organization whose aim is to promote gender equality and to combat discrimination and sociocultural, economic and political marginalization of women and young people, in Africa in general and in Cameroon in particular.

Having studied the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995, particularly the recommendation relating to gender equality and the empowerment of women, Women in Alternative Action notes that, 20 years after the adoption of the Platform for Action, encouraging progress has been made in implementing that recommendation and many African countries are performing very well, notably in two areas:

- Gender parity in primary education. Of the 49 African countries that can provide statistics, 17 have achieved parity and 9 of those have managed to maintain parity since the 1990s (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Millennium Development Goals Report 2013).

- The representation of women in decision-making. The number of seats occupied by women in national parliaments has increased. In Cameroon, over the course of the two last parliamentary terms, the percentage of female members of parliament increased from 10.5 per cent in 2007 to 13.8 per cent in 2012. The proportion of female members of Government increased from 6.2 per cent in 2005 to 10 per cent in 2011. At the local level, 6.7 per cent of mayors and 20 per cent of deputy mayors are women (Cameroon, Millennium Development Goals Report 2012). Twenty of the 100 members of the Senate of Cameroon are women (20 per cent).

However, further efforts are required in order to achieve gender parity in secondary and higher education. In 2010, only 12 of the 37 African countries with available statistics had achieved parity (UNDP, Millennium Development Goals Report 2014). In sub-Saharan Africa, the gender parity indices for secondary and higher education were the lowest in the world at 0.84 and 0.64 respectively (UNDP, Millennium Development Goals Report 2014). In Cameroon, 21.1 per cent of adult women have completed at least secondary-level education, compared to 34.9 per cent of adult men.

Furthermore, the promotion of women's access to paid work outside the agricultural sector remains a challenge, despite some reported progress. In Cameroon, for example, women's participation in the labour market is 63.6 per cent, compared to 76.7 per cent for men. The proportion of women aged 15-64 employed in non-agricultural paid jobs remains low (24.3 per cent in 2001, 24.5 per cent in 2007 and 27.3 per cent in 2010) (Cameroon, Millennium Development Goals Report 2012).

Therefore, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, we continue to face a great challenge with regard to gender equality and the empowerment of women, who continue to be held back by certain cultural practices (notably early marriage, preference given to boys with regard to schooling and power relations within the family) and a lack of economic opportunities (access to markets, capital and professional training, patriarchal influence) and political opportunities (lack of political training).

In order to sustain progress, it is vital to initiate a cultural transformation that will reverse negative attitudes towards gender equality and women's empowerment in certain societies, particularly in Cameroon.

Public policy should be refocused to tackle discrimination against girls and women in the education system and gender-based discrimination in relation to access to education, economic opportunities and employment, in order to ensure the increased participation of women in economic and productive activities and to involve them in decision-making at all levels of society. To achieve that goal, it will be essential to implement economic and social policies that best meet the needs of both men and women. In particular, that will mean drawing up positive discrimination strategies to benefit women, reforming those aspects of customary law that are detrimental to women and girls and allocating increased human and financial resources to the enforcement of relevant provisions.

Women in Alternative Action calls on the United Nations, and the African States in particular, to transform the political will demonstrated into concrete action by:

- Establishing suitable and practical regulatory frameworks
- Establishing strong institutions managed by competent individuals of integrity
- Providing the material and financial resources required to run those institutions
- Adopting positive discrimination strategies that benefit women in order to boost gender equality and empower women, in particular:
    - Harsher penalties for offences relating to sexual harassment, early marriage, the rape of minors and violence against female pupils
    - The introduction of scholarships for girls from poor families
    - The allocation of training grants and fee exemptions for women and girls in training colleges
    - The creation of a women's bank to fund women's projects
    - The strengthening of quotas for women's representation in decision-making bodies.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, we the members of Women in Alternative Action will spare no effort in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women by implementing the recommendations and strategies enshrined in the Beijing Statement and Platform for Action.

We believe that, together, we can help to build a new society based on justice, love and respect for human dignity.